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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

A NEW IMAGE

By

Scott E. Rummier

July, 1990

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis paper is about the development and completion of a series of oil paintings. Some of the images were exhibited at the Bevier Gallery at the Rochester Institute of Technology this Spring, in partial completion of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree. This paper will complete the requirements.

The paper will give a chronology of the development of the paintings, beginning with the ideas that preceded the works, and leading through the various stages of their completion. A final section will consist of an artist's statement and will relate my work to some of the dilemmas of modern day painting. A series of notes has been added for clarity.

CHRONOLOGY- PART I

My experience in art, which led to the thesis, was a mixture of conscious and unconscious processes. My general approach was to learn as much as possible, and then to consciously invent a new art form. The exact workings of this were unknown to me (unconscious), and were the result of years of experiment.

I developed a technique of painting realistic images that involved a complicated system of glazes. It occurred to me later that what I was doing was fudging and I found this to be limiting, even though the images were beautiful.

I discovered that by reversing the conditions of these paintings, I was able to find a unique image, one which did not fit into any of the established categories of style. The way I found to do this was to make a grid and to fill each cell in the grid with a full spectrum of color. All of the colors would be mixed one cell at a time using a repetitive brush stroke.

The next step was the thesis proposal, in which I determined to use my past experience to investigate the distortions of form which have characterized Impressionist and

Cubist paintings. The method used was to be programmatic- that is, I would complete the paintings according to a set of preestablished criteria. A series of paintings would be carried out in this fashion. An intellectual strategy using concepts drawn in part from Hegel, Wittgenstein, and Nietzsche would be used to investigate the body of work as a whole.

CHRONOLOGY- PART II

Because of the programmatic nature by which the paintings were executed, I would like to describe the decisions behind each component of the program, and how they were arrived at.

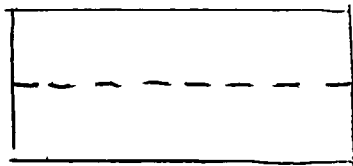
I begin with a wooden stretcher of dimensions 3' x 9'6", surfaced with Masonite. On this surface I stretch canvas, which is then covered with rabbitskin glue. Over this a grid is drawn using a black ballpoint pen.

I prefer to keep the exact nature of the application of paint a secret because I do not want people to copy it. A mixture of oil and wax is added to oil paint in a programmatic fashion, mixing the colors after they are applied to the surface.

The size of the canvas is intended to border on the large, so that the viewer is not sure whether he overwhelms it or vice-versa. The proportion is π (3.14), which I see as a sort of postmodern rectangle (an approximate doubling of the golden mean- 1.6), and the point at which the dimension of height becomes negligible relative to the width. Its rectangularity begins to slip

from memory.

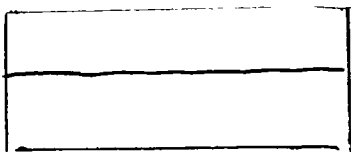
It also represents an interesting progressus,
which implicates the human figure, which I illustrate as a
series of compositions (C) and decompositions (D).



$D_{1.6}$ YIELDS P_i



D_{P_i} YIELDS 1.6



C_{P_i} YIELDS 1.6

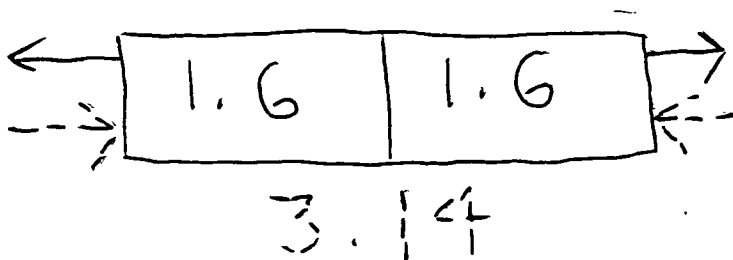


$C_{1.6}$ YIELDS P_i

The viewer is implicated in two ways. He is implicated physically by virtue of the doubling of the painting creating a golden mean which approximates a human height. I am assuming there is something innate in the golden mean to which man naturally relates.

He is implicated intellectually by the series of compositions listed above because they are not an exact match- there is an unevenness which causes tension. The doubling of the mean is greater than Pi; cutting the mean in half will result in a proportion longer and narrower than Pi.

I chose Pi because it holds in check or contains the expansive pressure of two means, illustrated below.



This seems to evoke the most powerful tension.

The character of the grid is determined as follows:

- a- each cell must be similar;
- b- a cell of axis 6 is good because it corresponds to the constraints of perspective (e.g. the cubic solid);
- c- the cell should have a powerful/generic appropriative power or tension: Van Gogh's sunflower, a mechanical gear, a Warhol flower, both male and female characteristics.

The size of the grid cells is determined relative to the size of the painting. It is large enough to attract the viewer's gaze, to be seen as a building block. It is small enough to attract the viewer's glance, and to give an impression of diaphonousness.

The size of the brushstroke is determined in the same manner except relative to the size of the cell. Each stroke is large enough to be stared at, but not so obtrusive that it cannot sometimes be glanced over.

I wanted to convey the entire spectrum of color and value. Cadmium red medium, Cerulean blue hue, and Cadmium yellow light are used because they are roughly primary in color and are of approximately equal tinting strength. Orange and green could be derived from these as well.

A certain amount of muddiness is needed to give the image body; a level of brightness is also important to maintain the visual intensity of the piece. With these considerations in mind, Indigo and Violet are added as fugitive colors- not derived from the primaries, and of a

lesser intensity.

White is added to complete the range of values.

CHRONOLOGY- III

Slight variations were allowed for in these general criteria as I worked, because I was always in search of an image that was more satisfying. For example, the size of the brush stroke, the amount of wax added to the paint, the type of brush used, and the various kinds of colors available were varied slightly from image to image.

I believe I have explored all of the important options within the restrictions I have set for myself. I believe I have found the 'best' way to paint under these circumstances, or at the least have come closer and closer toward the ideal with each successive image.

The first image in the series had colors of higher tinting strength in the red, orange, and yellow areas. The violet that was used was too strong and seemed to muddy the image a bit. Too little wax was used, which made the surface too smooth; this in turn rendered the brushstrokes somewhat lifeless and prevented them from articulating the edges of the cells.

The next couple of images were too blue. The Dioxizene purple that was used as violet was too powerful in tinting strength and muddied the image.

The final image came closest to the ideal. There was nothing objectionable about it in terms of color clarity

and evenness of tinting strength. I have a sense that a watercolor brush would leave a finer, clearer stroke, so I am considering that option now.

I do not feel that the images are merely experiments, nor do I have a sense of being trapped. It is more like sliding down a water slide, gaining momentum as I go. I feel energized by these 'experiments'. When I look at them I see and feel a sense of potential, and of the necessity of each image and, yes, of every brush stroke.

CHRONOLOGY- PART IV

In this section I would like to connect my ideas on Modernism with my interest in philosophy as these two areas have developed over the course of my thesis.

As a starting point, I would like to consider my paintings in relation to the philosophy of Wittgenstein. One of my paintings could be seen as one of the chimeras he develops in Philosophical Investigations:

"If you put the 'organization' of a visual impression on a level with color and shapes, you are proceeding from the idea of the visual impression as an inner object. Of course this makes the object into a chimera; a queerly shifting construction."¹

Wittgenstein's chimera is similar to my work in that it elicits questions but provides no final answers. The problem of a lack of answers can be overcome provided the search for them is interesting in itself.

The distortion of realism and its final answers in the situation above has characterized Modernism in painting. That there are not definite criteria for the visual impressions of Impressionism or the perspectives of Cubism shows that

it is enough that art question- it needn't provide final answers.

My hope is that my paintings will be of sufficient interest as to encourage the viewer to attempt an interpretation of the work, whether it be for a unifying theme, stylistic category, or artistic point of view. When no answer is obvious, I hope that the viewer would reconsider the language used in the search for an interpretation. One would have to distinguish emotive from rational points of view, for example. If again no answer immediately presents itself, I hope that the viewer would reconsider the rationale upon which the language was based.²

I would hope that this triad of interpretation-language-rationale would be engrossing and intellectually stimulating. It is possible that the viewer would gain an increased sensitivity to the problems involved in looking at art.

I believe it is possible to move beyond this constant questioning which has pervaded the chimeras and Modernism, and to attempt a creative solution of sorts. To do this, I wish to borrow from the philosopher Hegel.

According to Hegel, "truth is the whole", and history is the development of this truth.³ If this thesis can be applied to art history, individual developments would not be aberrational or random; rather, they would be necessary

stages in a developing process.⁴

Therefore, rather than be caught in an endless cycle of formal distortion and questioning, I want to focus my search on a consideration of the way in which my work fits into the development of art as a whole, and how it fits into the history of art.

I have discovered through an analysis of art history that my way of painting has not occurred before. Other paintings begin with a technique; a series of techniques result in a process; a series of processes result in a whole painting. My paintings are different in that once one reaches the level of 'whole painting', one is right back where one started, at the level of technique. Therefore, my paintings use a circular or self-referential system.⁵

Other paintings have used this type of system, but in a less pure way. The work of M.C. Escher uses this system but is less pure because it is always necessary to add extra things- a cartoon face or a gratuitous subject matter (for example, marching soldiers on an endless staircase).

In addition to being pure, my paintings take advantage of what is unique about painting. Paintings are available for direct inspection in ways in which other forms, such as music or mathematics are not. With painting, one can see the whole image, and is not bound to a strict sequence of

events, as in mathematics or music.

I would like to go beyond the question of 'newness' or novelty and to somehow harness the potential of this novelty. I want to focus not just on their difference, but on the fact that they are being created at this particular time in the historical continuum. If my paintings are the last in a series of Modernist developments, a sort of extreme case of Modernist distortion of form, I am looking for something interesting in these paintings that would relate to other paintings, and justify their position in the historical continuum.

To identify more clearly this something, I have considered the works of the philosopher Nietzsche. Nietzsche's central ~~theme~~, the importance of the dependence of the rational (Apollinian) and irrational (Dionysian) in art, is my major concern.⁶ From a Nietzschean point of view, Modernism in its distortion of form could be seen as a conflict between organizing properties of art and chaotic or dissonant properties.

If one accepts Nietzsche's thesis and applies it to a study of art history in a Hegelian sense, it will seem necessary that a resolution of these opposing forces will complete the development of Modernism. My work attempts a solution of this problem in that it liberates the rational and the irrational from conflict. Line, shape,

and color are no longer chasing an elusive goal but have reached a steady state. When one considers the line of formal developments or arrangements in art of this century, mine could be seen as a solution.

This solution is somewhat related to that achieved by Piet Mondrian. One important difference is that I am more concerned with resolving the dichotomy of line and color in abstract art. This consideration puts my work in line with Helen Frankenthaler, who resolved this dichotomy as it was evidenced in the work of Gorky and de Kooning.

Frankenthaler's technique allowed her to synthesize line and color, so that both were being achieved simultaneously on the canvas. My technique allows me to synthesize shape in addition to line and color because the shape is not arbitrary with regard to the technique, it is in a direct line with it: the technique is a function or a means of achieving the shape.

CONCLUSIONS

Once this solution has been reached, I feel a sense of liberation, which is maintained by continuing the program of painting I have been following. This has resulted in a series of paintings which are so similar as to be virtual copies of each other. In this section, I would like to deal with this body of work as a whole, to describe my personal experience of them, and to develop a plan of dealing with these images in a social context.

I have developed a technique and a style of painting with a view toward completing the Modernist tendency to distort form. Once this has been achieved, once form has been distorted to the maximum, painting as a Modern development has ceased, and gives way to a series of simulations. This notion corresponds to our common experience with the mass media, in which there are no originals, only copies of copies, etc.. When seen in the context of Modernism, then, my paintings could be seen as the 'last paintings'.

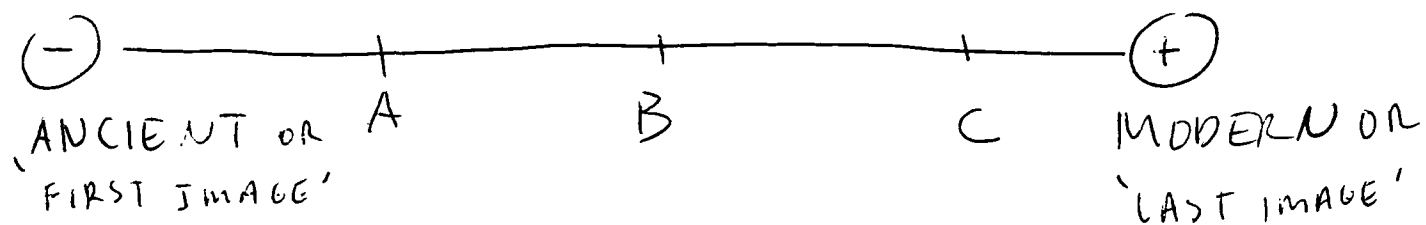
Because this distorted form entails an independence of formal elements, it runs contrary to the processes of identification and individuation which have marked art since the cave painters of Lascaux. From this vantage point, my paintings could be seen as the 'first paintings'-

utterly primitive.

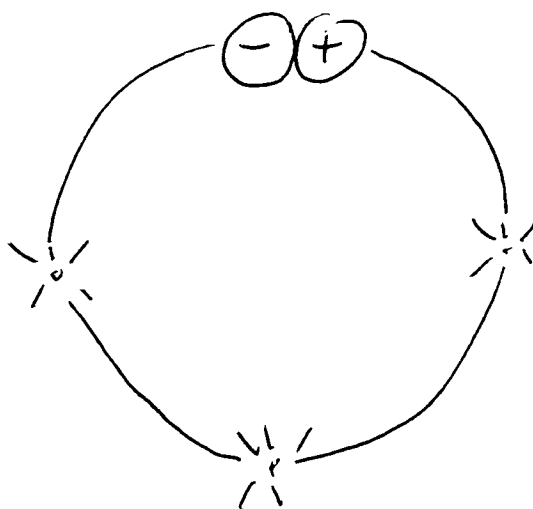
I think of these paintings as the first and last cogs in the machine of art history. Unlike other cogs, however, these are stationary, and jam the machine, because they do not admit of the easy sweep of identification associated with other art objects. Each of these jammed cogs will have a tremendous amount of potential energy which has no outlet. I have used my paintings to investigate the new equilibrium which results.

I see this new situation replacing the familiar modes of art-historical interpretation with a tremendous explosive force. Instead of moving in a typical linear fashion, the system is short-circuited because the opposing poles are brought into contact. Classical Postmodernism would have it that once all of the Modern images have been made, history would repeat itself, as old images are rehashed again and again. My system is different: once all of the Modern images have been made, the system is short-circuited, and each successive image is evidence of that event: my paintings are evidence of the rupture of the system.

Traditional time-line; ancient and modern poles of opposition.



Coincidence of first and last images.



Explosions at each juncture.

Such a painting would not operate in the same way as other art objects. Rather than move through the context of artists, critics, dealers, and museums as a commodity, it would intrude upon and take advantage of these institutions. I would liken its mode of being to that of a computer virus. With a firm view of the improbability of the situation, but in keeping with the concept of the piece, I have developed a method for deploying the virus.

As a first step, I am hoping that the unusual nature of the pieces will work in their favor and act as a publicity gimmick. One especially unusual feature of the image is its ability to disturb the principles of verification and discreteness upon which art objects are based. Any attempt to catalog or even photograph the images will meet with confusion. As in the case of the commercial-hopping, battery-powered rabbit on TV, I am hoping that confusion will breed publicity.

As a second step, I have decided to sell each successive image at a proportionally increasing rate:

1st image @ \$800.

2nd image @ \$1600.

etc..

12 paintings sold at this rate would put the price over the \$1 million mark

This combination of hype and money is intended to

price the paintings out of the art market. Ideally, the market would explode; after the explosion, perhaps a new context would ensue, one in which art is not controlled by money.⁷

Although I will be criticized for the outrageousness of this plan, I would counter that my ego is fully absorbed by the work. I would not be asking (overtly or otherwise) for people to buy my work because I am a personality. This would be an advantage over the situation that permeates some of the latest trends.⁸

This last analysis extends in part to the money issue as well. Many Postmodern works criticize the workings of capital while their creators enjoy the money in a concrete sense. I do not feel this disparity.⁹

The work may stand in some relation to recent political events, in particular the changing balance of power in Europe and between the United States and Russia. In the political cases and in my work, a turning point has been reached which involves the reconciliation of poles. People will have to develop a sense of value that will be in tune with this emerging situation. The aggressive, viral nature of my works could symbolize the sublimation of warlike instincts. As political power becomes less polarized, and art gains in popularity (as a magnet for ideas, fame, wealth, etc.), what had been functions of war could now be functions of art.

Accordingly, I am having a colleague install a

conceptual piece near the Berlin wall, consisting of photocopies of the paintings and a written text. I am also arranging for a non-profit exhibition of my work in Tokyo, in keeping with that area's rise as the center of finance, and the place where much of the money comes from for the purchase of Western masterpieces. I want to make a connection there, perhaps in anticipation of a more global aesthetic syntax:¹⁰

I am going to try to actually sell the pieces by taking out advertizing space in one of the major art publications in the Summer or Fall.

POSTSCRIPT/ BOOKENDS

I want to be as honest as I can be and to acknowledge as much as possible the limits of and objections to the body of this, the writing-about-art. In Particular, I want to expose the forthcoming text, which in turn is intended to expose the paintings as intended works of art. For it may very well be that my intentions are the one (only?) thing hidden from me, and are secretly driving the whole process. The difficult nature of the work is here stated so as to delimit the intent of the thesis. This approach is supported by the fact that art should speak for itself, and any line I may have on it will perforce be dumb (nonspeaking). These prefatory marks, this preface, are not to be senseless or to let me do my own thing: it is just that I am conscious of the shorthand nature of artwriting and want to expose it.

I am committed to continuing the painting of these paintings. Any deviation from my course would be conservative, therefore not devious: the idea of deviation is incorporated in the work already. The paintings as they stand now have more than a little to do with performance. They are set against artists, critics, dealers, and galleries- and are for that reason all the more enticing. As viruses, they are dependent upon that which they adhere to; therefore, any effect they have on the artworld will say something about the artworld. It will be interesting to see if that world has within itself the power to overturn itself. If the images fail to have effect, which is probable, their potential will nonetheless remain and be interesting. Their built-in radicalness makes them resistant to co-opting in the way that few has been: Genet, Burroughs, perhaps Warhol.

My background had been a chaotic one, and the pictures reflect this. A series of highly unusual events resulted in their inception in the state of Louisiana.

It has been to my surprise, not my intention that these pieces, created initially for invisible and private reasons, seem to engage and have been engaged by the World.

My concern here is to heal the disparity that all artists must feel: if to be an artist is to describe original perception, how responsible is he for the entailments of his work? This problem

manifests itself most clearly in the backward

nature of the art-enterprise, which runs contrary to the Scientific I start with a conclusion(perception), and adjust expositional fortes to fit it.

This allows for a different perspective on the work. Rather than being about Postmodernism, the works use Postmodernism as a transition between work done in isolation and work on display in the world. Hence the human, performative aspect. The irony that closes the circle is that the most pithy thing I can say about the work is that it is a new image. Thus, they enter into Postmodern times while refusing P-M's central tenet: there is no such thing as a new image.

NOTES

¹Wittgenstein, Ludwig. Philosophical Investigations.
(New York: The MacMillan Company, 1953), p. 196.

²Flew, Antony, Ed.. A Dictionary of Philosophy.
(St. Martin's Press, New York, 1979).

Flew uses this triad to make a connection between
Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, the difference being
Nietzsche's lack of belief in conceptual enlightenment.

³Hegel, George Wilhelm Friedrich. Phenomenology of the Mind.
Various publishers and dates.
Quote is from the Preface.

⁴Hegel, George Wilhelm Friedrich. Ibid.

⁵Hofstadter, Douglas R.. Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid.
(New York: Vintage Books, 1980).
Deals with reflexive systems in mathematics, music, art.

⁶Kaufmann, Walter, Ed. Basic Writings of Nietzsche.
(New York: The Modern Library, 1968).
The Birth of Tragedy stresses a dependence of the Apollinian
ideal of order on the destructive Dionysian festivals
of Greek culture.

⁷Walker, Richard.

A \$60 Million Van Gogh.

Artnews.

Volume 88.

September 1989

p.31.

Walker gives a good account of the ways in which money determines who ultimately gets to see a painting.

⁸I am generalizing somewhat, but there seems to be a consensus that successful artists are successful personalities in many cases.

⁹This could apply to Peter Halley or Barbara Kruger, perhaps.

¹⁰Chapman, Christine.

Power and Patronage.

Artnews.

Volume 89.

March 1990

p. 138

The relationship between power and patronage in the new Japanese art market is explored.

